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Visions of History: Simon Schama, Mark Noll, and Paul Ricoeur

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The noted British historian Simon Schama has recently made a popular case for the power, utility and inspiration that history can provide Britain through its school system.[1] Schama carefully insists that history is not a placebo for the arguments and ills that any given community may be plagued by, but neither will critical history allow a genealogy of self-congratulation. History is by definition a contested subject, he says, due to the nature of the practice in which historians participate. Schama lists several skills and benefits of this practice, which include: scrutinizing evidence and assessing credibility; analyzing the nature of power; understanding how societies acquire and loose wealth; and studying the nature of war, leadership, and authority. Citizens thus equipped are more likely to construct capacious histories where the narrow interests of any particular group will be dissolved in the larger, conflicted stories of the past. This is not some sentimental tale of political correctness, however, but a brutally practical education in tolerance. Nor will this kind of history be dead weight, Schama insists, but a source of inspiration over which participants can engage in lively and vital debate. And while this critical conversation will seldom be easy or smooth, it will preserve the fund of a "common memory"; in Schama's case this fund consists of six central events in Britain's past meant to give reflective pause in the face of the strong tensions that threaten to tear communities apart.

Several years ago Mark Noll provided a somewhat similar account for evangelical Christians in his *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*.[2] Like Schama, Noll uses a set of central events that he thinks shaped Christianity as a means of teaching Christians about their past. These short essays and the accompanying discussion questions emerged from teaching a course at church. What is the relationship that Noll sees between the teaching of history and the Christian community? According to Noll studying the history of Christianity "provides repeated, concrete demonstration concerning the irreducibly historical character of Christian faith." It also provides a perspective on the interpretation of Christian scripture, a useful "laboratory for examining Christian interactions with surrounding culture", confirming in a fairly clear way that "God sustains the church despite the church's own frequent efforts to betray its Saviour and its own high calling."[3] To this picture we should probably add that sketched by Noll in his more famous book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, where he identifies the anti-intellectual bias within evangelicalism as a historical aberration.[4] Indeed, a significant part of Noll's attempt to recover a conception of faithful Christian life as one informed by and embodied in intellectual pursuit, is to recover and re-present a history of evangelicalism in which this becomes evident – as in the person of Jonathan Edwards, for example.

For Schama, then, history constitutes a critical practice through which it strives to continually produce better histories, a practice that informs and embodies good citizenship. And while this history will always be contested, continually open to revision, the very act of critical scholarship will preserve the means by which better histories can be made. This activity not only helps communities persevere, it helps them thrive – it promotes critical thinking, the construction of better arguments, and the cultivation of political virtues like tolerance without any attendant sanctimony. For Noll, Christians who understand their shared history will be more aware of its historical character, more aware of the context of Scriptural interpretation and its relation to a particular culture and context, and, ultimately, more aware of the fallibility of a community's ability to live faithfully in light of its sacred texts. At the same time, Noll insists that intellectual inquiry as practiced in Christian history has been and should remain a vital component of the faithful Christian life, collectively and individually. Both historians, then, seem to think that history does in fact have some important lessons to teach, broadly construed; and both historians suggest that there is a connection between the historian's practice and specific kinds of virtues, be they political or religious.

It might be useful to take a step back here and consider how it is that we learn about history. When history is taught in a school – on a Sunday at church or on a Monday at public school – how is it taught? What happens when we pick up a book and read about the past? Or when we participate in a community in which a story of some kind – at a historical monument, say, or ceremony – is told? What we encounter are *representations* of the past in spoken or written discourse – be they analytical or narrative, fictional or historical, governed by standard discursive techniques and tropes. Insofar as both Schama and Noll fail to address the substance of history as representation, focusing as they do on practice, they fail to consider the relationship *between* the practice of history, the mediated representations fashioned by historians, and the more general historical condition of various communities, be they religious, political, or something else.

In order to understand this relationship we can turn to the work of Paul Ricoeur, who has explored this at great length. According to Ricoeur historiography is a representation in that historical narrative is a species of symbolic discourse. In being a kind of discourse whose (narrative) form is wedded to its content (narrativization of events), historical narratives say *more* than what they say simply as narratives. As mediations they transmit a meaningful force that exceeds content and form alone. One of Ricoeur's central insights in *Time and Narrative* is that the "grasping together" of characters and events as actions performed in time is represented through a similar grasping together in narrative, which he called "emplotment," following Aristotle's *Poetics*.[5] In being figurative symbols historical narratives are more or less successful in revealing the meaning, coherence, or significance of events, while they simultaneously attest to the realism of events through their narration. And while historical narratives as representations differ from other narrative discourses in referring to a "real" human past, as opposed to an "imaginary" referent in the case of fiction, historiography is nonetheless governed by the same structured human imagination, which does not mean that historical narrative is any more or less

"true." As Hayden White has asked in this context: "How else can any 'past,' which is by definition comprised of events, processes, structures, and so forth that are considered to be no longer perceivable, be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an 'imaginary' way?"[6]

White's question brings us back to the seemingly more practical concerns of Schama and Noll. If historical narrative is a symbolic discourse that "says more than it says", who is it that perceives the surplus of meaning so generated? In *Memory, History, Forgetting* Ricoeur proposes that the reception of such meaning is given to the citizen, placed between the figures of the historian and the judge, without for a minute suggesting that any kind of absolute objectivity or infallible impartially is somehow possible. Rather the citizen emerges as a third partner between the historian who constructs and produces representations, and the judge who interprets and applies law in rendering a verdict. The citizen's "gaze" differs from these two figures in being "structured on the basis of personal experience, variously instructed by penal judgment and by published historical inquiry." Placed between the historian and the judge, the citizen's interventions are never completed because continually contested, yet these interventions are based on the search for a quasi-final "assured judgment."[7] A similar imaginative setup can be easily enough constructed for the Christian believer, as a member of the religious community or *ekklesia*, who also intervenes, in this instance between the historian or exegete and the "judge" or religious practitioner (priest, pastor).

In constructing representations of the past, Ricoeur argues that historians generate symbolic discourses that express an intention to metaphorically "stand for" the past. A historian thus creates a kind of discursive monument, like those historical monuments that come down to us from the past, as a "true" account. Ultimately it is up to the communities in which these representations are generated to determine the force of their meaning. And it is here that Ricoeur locates the interaction between the historian and the citizen – and we may again insert the believer (or a member of another community). For history not only expands the collective memory of a given community, it corrects, criticizes, and even refutes the memory of that community when "it folds back upon itself and encloses itself within its own sufferings to the point of rendering itself blind and deaf to the suffering of other communities. It is along the path of critical history that memory encounters the sense of justice."[8] Behind the historian's intention to truth is the attempt to uncover "the face of those who formerly existed, who acted and suffered, and who were keeping the promises they left unfulfilled."[9]

The realization of this attempt to understand and explain the past will of course be continually deferred, for no one will ever write the final historical account of anything. Rather, the realization of the historian's intent can only be taken up, Ricoeur suggests, in the community of readers in which the narrative has been fashioned. Here the community's intention to remain faithful to memory, be it national or religious or something else, comes up against the historian's intention to remain true to history and the judge's intention to render a just verdict. At this crossroad between history and memory and law, the citizen and the believer can actively reposition his or herself in the attempt to achieve a better vision or "gaze", pursuing a sense of

justice. It is this *power* of repositioning, of achieving a new vision, a changed perspective or an enriched horizon, that Riceour most forcefully highlights by relating how historical narratives and common memory can remain in constructive dialogue. This power of repositioning is akin to the process of hermeneutic *appropriation* which aims at understanding. When we approach a text as readers we aim to understand it, we do not aim to project ourselves into the text but to receive an "enlarged self from the apprehension of proposed worlds" in the text itself. We "take up" the proposed world of meaning in a text just as we abide by the rule of a game we participate in; yet as in any played game, during the act of playing/reading a new experience emerges that is not coextensive with the subject playing the game or reading the text. In order to "take up" this experience we must simultaneously "let go", submitting ourselves to the game and to the text.[10] If we transfer the work of appropriation in texts to that of historical representations, we can see that the stories generated by criticism can be appropriated by citizens and believers, expanding memory's horizon of meaning and thus resisting the "enclosure" to which it is sometimes prone. To Schama's account we can say with Ricoeur that critical history continues to generate the call of justice from other citizens and other communities by refusing the citizens of liberal democracies to allow memory to close itself off in an insular fashion. To Noll's account we can say with Ricoeur that critical history continues to elucidate the *kerygma* or proclamation of the Word in the "new testament" by refusing the believers and listeners of the Christian message to block up their ears with the voice of memory alone.[11] While there is much more to be gleaned from Ricoeur's philosophy of history as a philosophy of both historicity (*Geschichte*) and history (*Historie*), we can at least look to his work here in order to better formulate the promise and the power of how critical history and common memory can work together for good.

Endnotes

1. Simon Schama, "My vision for history," *Guardian*, November 9, 2010, http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/nov/09/future-history-schools.
2. Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).
3. Noll, *Turning Points*, 15–8.
4. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 35–49.
5. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1985). See vol. 1 for "grasping together" and "emplotment."
6. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 57.
7. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 333.
8. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 500.
9. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 499.

10. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, “Appropriation,” *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, trans. and ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 182–83, 191.
11. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, “Introduction to Bultmann,” trans. Peter McCormick, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 381–401.